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ABSTRACT

In response to a shortage of special education teachers in Montana, a pilot emergency endorsement program (Office of Public Instruction Special Education Endorsement Project) was initiated in 1987. During 1988-97, the program enrolled 110 students, all of whom were simultaneously employed as teachers. Of these, 71 completed the program and received a special education endorsement, 24 were still enrolled in the program, and 25 had dropped out or lost eligibility. This study, one in a series of evaluations, presents results of interviews with program graduates, school administrators, mentors of project candidates, and students unable to complete the program. Interviews with eight administrators and mentors note the number of students employed or certified, evaluation of the program, opinions on the need for the program, satisfaction with the teachers, and the helpfulness of the mentoring program. Interviews with 15 project graduates cover their satisfaction with financial support, degree to which the program contributed to their obtaining their degree, satisfaction with the program at their particular college, student teaching experience, usefulness and practicality of the program, mentoring, and employment. Reasons are enumerated for student dropouts. Additional comments from administrators, mentors, and graduates discuss their overall satisfaction with the program and the need for timely access to classes, for program expansion and publicity, and for more flexibility in class scheduling. A table summarizes program outcomes. (SAS)

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KEEPING QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATORS UNDER THE BIG SKY

Background

In 1986, Montana suffered an acute shortage of special education teachers. Despite recruitment efforts in and out-of-state, the lack of special education teachers had forced at least nine school districts to provide special needs students with non-endorsed teachers. Immediately evident was the problem that Montana's colleges and universities were not training enough people to meet the state's special education needs, especially in rural communities.

A pilot emergency endorsement program was initiated in 1987. The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) Special Education Endorsement Project grew out of this emergency plan of action. The Montana Comprehensive System of Personal Development (CSPD) spearheaded the development of the OPI program, which began in 1988 and was funded by federal monies.

Since 1988, the OPI Special Education Endorsement Project has certified a total of seventy-one teachers. A breakdown of the number of students enrolled each year is shown in Table 1. A study of the project based on the years between 1989 and 1993, demonstrated that the project was helping to meet Montana's special education needs. A four year follow-up has been completed showing progress made and the project impact since 1994. The present study includes interviews conducted with graduates of the project, administrators, mentors of project candidates, and students who were not able to complete their endorsement through the OPI Special Education Endorsement Project.

Interview Results with Administrators and Mentors

The following questions were asked of eight administrators who participated in the project either by mentoring a project candidate or employing personnel who were certified through the Endorsement Project. The responses listed reflect all the opinions given.

Did you have any teachers trained in the Project? How many?
The eight administrators interviewed employed a total of twenty-five students who were either currently in the project or had been certified through the project.

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What do you think of this program?
All of the people interviewed agreed that this is an excellent program. Sample responses include the following:

- The program is a nice way to meet needs when there is a shortage of teachers.
- Great program. It offers a chance to take teachers who they know can do it, and get them certified.
- Excellent program. Would recommend it to any administrator.
- Exceptional program. Helped out in tight situations. Provided excellent staff members who are still on staff today.
- Like the structure and direction in providing teachers with training opportunities. Especially helpful to smaller, rural districts who have trouble finding qualified teachers.

Do you still see a need for this program in Montana?
All but one administrator agreed it is a much needed program, especially for the rural districts who have trouble filling special education positions. Two administrators stressed that it is needed now more than ever, and not only for the smaller districts but also for the larger ones. A position in a larger district was filled recently by an Endorsement Project candidate due to the inability to attract a beginning special education teacher. Early career teachers have a hard time living on their salary as the cost of living in larger towns increases. The administrator who expressed concern stated that they couldn't say for sure if the program were still needed. Having the option was good, but they had no present need to sponsor another student.

Are you satisfied with the performance of the teachers trained in this program?
All said they couldn't be more pleased with the quality and strength of the teachers whom they had hired. One felt students received more training through this program than through a regular endorsement program. One administrator felt that some type of summer program or short, two-day late summer training would be beneficial to those teachers who would be going out into the field with very little understanding of what to expect. They are weak in the beginning and really have no one else to turn to for help, especially in rural areas. When asked about district flexibility in letting teachers attend some type of training, the administrator felt this would not be a problem. The district would benefit from the teacher having a better idea of what they were going to face, what would be expected of them, and the paperwork they would handle.

Did you find the mentoring training and support for the teacher to be helpful?
All administrators felt the mentor training was very helpful and necessary for student support. It helped them feel more secure and connected to someone they could call if they ran in to problems. Those who had gone through the mentoring program felt the training they had and the contact and resources they were given were very good. They did find it to be an incredible amount of work, but felt if the mentors knew that from the start and were committed to the outcome it would produce, they would see the benefits. One mentor felt the forms needed to be updated. They also felt that the

emphasis on candidate observation maybe misdirected. Most mentor time was spent answering questions and procuring resources or materials.

What would you like to see done differently? Additional comments.
The following suggestions and comments were made:

- The program needs to expand into the larger districts; they are having as difficult a time filling special education positions as smaller districts.
- The travel involved for mentor training was sometimes hard. Felt the MetNet session was a good idea and would like to see more. Also would like to see more direction for the mentors.
- There needs to be more awareness that the project exists! Target active special education teachers instead of administrators/principals who don't always pass along the information. Hopes the project keeps going and would be happy to give a letter of support!
- It would be helpful to set up some type of training for students before they begin teaching. They hope the program continues.
- This is a much needed program and hopes it is maintained and expanded, possibly into other specialized areas, such as speech therapy.

Interview Results with Project Graduates

"Grateful for the opportunity to complete my special education endorsement while still being able to work" was the prevalent response to the questions we asked of the teachers who had received their special education endorsement through this program. Ideas and suggestions were shared as to what areas of the project could be enhanced along with what areas of the project were most beneficial. Shown below are all the opinions given to each question that was presented to the fifteen project graduates who were interviewed.

Were you satisfied with the processing of your financial support for the program?
All the students said they were satisfied with the processing of their stipends and the time frame in which their money was received. Two students indicated that although they appreciated the money they received, it really was not enough to cover the cost of taking the classes, which not only included tuition, fees, and books, but also traveling costs.

Would you have gotten this degree if you had not received the OPI grant?
Nine students indicated they probably would have pursued their special education endorsement without the OPI grant. However, they also stated that the grant made a difference by easing the financial burden and gave them added incentive to attend. One student appreciated the difference it made in their request to transfer to a special education position, as it showed the district they were committed to a career move to special education. Six students said they probably would not have pursued their endorsement without this program.

Were you satisfied with the special education program at the college you attended?
Thirteen students said they were satisfied with the program at the college they attended. They liked the fact that many people from out in the field were brought in to teach their classes. They also appreciated the help and support they received from the contact person at the college they attended. Of those thirteen, four made the following comments:

- Yes, except for one summer session when a reading class required was not offered. The student had to attend another college and attend an extra summer session to finish.
- At times the way they offered classes made it difficult to complete the program in two summers.
- Wish there had been more courses on collaboration and inclusion required at the time they went through the program. They had no inclusion experience when they started teaching special education.
- The outreach programs were a great help in finishing her endorsement. Would like to see more of these, and possibly a way courses could be taken via computer.

Two students indicated they were not happy with their programs and cited the fact that a reading course was not available as they had originally been told, and that politics, power struggles and inconsistencies with the program made finishing their endorsement very frustrating.

Did you find your classes provided you with useful and practical information? Did they prepare you for the reality of teaching special education?
The overwhelming response to this question was yes, as much as possible, but nothing prepares you for being out in the field. Nothing beats reality and being on your own. Many indicated the co-teaching and practicum experience taught them the most. The information received in the classroom, for the most part, was helpful and gave them an overview of special education, along with legal and administrative requirements. It also provided them with resources for future use. Only one student expressed dissatisfaction with their program, stating that there was no practical information given and that the classes were bureaucratically oriented. They felt sorry for students who had never been in the field based on the lack of information they were receiving, and were glad they had some experience teaching special education.

Where did you do your student teaching?
Of the fifteen students surveyed, eleven were still teaching in the same school where they had done their student teaching. Of the four who were teaching elsewhere, three students taught through the MSU-Billings Summer Enrichment Program (no longer in existence). The fourth student accepted a position at a school closer to her home.

Was your student teaching a productive learning experience?
Thirteen students said that this was where they gained the most awareness and realization of what being a special education teacher was all about. One was especially grateful for being able to continue her job. Two students were dissatisfied

with their student teaching because they had already been teaching for two years. They felt student teaching was redundant.

Were you satisfied with the on-site mentorship program?
Fourteen students said they were very satisfied and liked this component of the program. One student was glad it wasn't "overdone" since they had already been teaching. The one remaining student expressed concern that the mentor did not provide the type of contact that made a difference for someone who had already taught.

Did you get a job or get to keep a job because of the OPI program?
Eleven students indicated they kept a position because of the OPI program. Four students were able to accept positions based on their program participation.

Where are you currently teaching? What are you currently teaching? Grade? Regular or special education? If you are not currently teaching special education, did you ever? (See Table 1 for responses.)

Any additional comments?
All fifteen students were very supportive and appreciative of the program. They were glad it was available to them and hope that it continues. Suggestions given to help improve the program included:

- Make classes needed for the project available at all times rather than on a rotating basis, as class times sometimes conflicted.
- Thought the program was wonderful and hopes it continues. An increase in the stipend amount given to students would help as costs continue to rise.
- Classes hard to get at some colleges. Feels more flexibility is needed.

Other Comments:

- Glad to see you can now get your endorsement and Master's at the same time. This was not available when they went through the project.
- Very appreciative of the program, but disappointed they had to go through certification again even though they had been teaching in another state.

Reasons Students Did Not Complete Program

According to records kept since 1988, a total of fifteen students either dropped out of the program or were no longer deemed eligible. Various reasons the students did not complete the program included:

1. The student chose to take another job closer to their home that was not in the area of special education.
2. The student was no longer employed and therefore was not eligible for the project.
3. The student received a teaching position in a regular education classroom and chose not to pursue a special education endorsement.

4. The student was not making satisfactory progress in the program and was granted a one year extension; satisfactory progress was still not made so student was no longer eligible.

Seven students who had dropped from the program were not available for comment.

Looking toward the future, we see an ever continuing and expanding need for programs such as the Special Education Endorsement Project. Montana's rural status, combined with its increasing population in larger areas, shows great potential for the expansion and growth of this project. We are proud of the accomplishments made in the last nine years. Our hope is that with an increased awareness of the project's existence, along with the growth of outreach programs and telecommunications, we will see an increase in the number of teachers wanting to obtain their special education endorsement while continuing to work in the field. We will be able to meet that need through expanded programs and on-line communication.

Table I
Results of Survey/Statistics - 1988 to 1997

	1994-1997	1988-1993	Total	%
Students accepted	48	62	110	
Students completed and teaching	21	50	71	65%
Special education only	12	31	43	61%
Regular/special education/Title 1	4	3	7	10%
Regular education or Title 1	2	6	8	11%
Not teaching	2	3	5	7%
Status unknown	1	7	8	11%
Teaching location of students surveyed				
District of origin	5	5	10	67%
Have moved from district	4	1	5	33%
Students in progress	24		24	
Teaching special education	19		19	79%
Teaching regular ed. or Title 1	1		1	4%
Teaching regular & special ed.	4		4	17%
Students who did not complete project	3	8	11	1%
Students who lost eligibility	0	4	4	.03%